

ABOVE: Identification patches, like the one above, were mandatory uniform insignia of all Italian POWs at Camp Roberts.

Camp Roberts to help in the war effort there.

Reports that Italian prisoners of war picked cotton while at Camp Roberts are not correct. By the time they were posted to Camp Roberts, the Italians were considered more suitable for work in the base's offices, automotive repair shops, shipping operations, hospital wards and kitchens.

The Italian Service Unit plan proved so successful that, in time, the Italian prisoners could leave camp, attend dances and visit American homes as long as they were escorted by a U.S. military officer. In particular, Italian-American families opened their doors to the Italian soldiers. Several Italian prisoners and American women met in this way, and fell in love.

Thus, the Italians who walloped the Paso Robles High School soccer team that February day in 1945, while officially still prisoners of war, were hardly comparable to captives anywhere else during the war. Despite constant worry about their families in war-torn Italy, they were glad to be away from combat. With their country's about-face in the war, the Italian prisoners in America now found themselves in a most fortuitous and favorable captivity.

WORK — AND FREEDOM

On May 18, 1944, the Paso Robles Press reported, "A group of 215 Italian soldiers, who volunteered for work in service units with the U.S. Army, are now stationed at Camp Roberts. Members of the 7th Italian quartermaster service company, they are taking a three-week orientation course which teaches Allied methods in maintenance work and basic English necessary to conduct the work. They serve under their own officers but with an officer from the U.S. army in command."

At least one more Italian unit, with my father in its ranks, would arrive around June 30, 1944, from the Atlanta Ordnance Depot in Georgia, where its members had undergone specialized training in automotive repair. In late August 1944, the Paso Robles Press reported that the unit was permitted to leave Camp Roberts on sightseeing trips when accompanied by a military escort who acted as a guide and interpreter.

The considerable freedom granted to the Italians was not appreciated by everyone. Some Americans, military and civilian, resented the presence of the Italian soldiers, pointing out that they were not bearing the hardships of U.S. servicemen overseas. During a time of wartime shortages on the home front, some took exception to the Italians' off-base travels.

"If the Italian prisoners get to see the 'sights' of the southland [Los Angeles area], it is more than Californians are able to do this year without gasoline and with vacation travel discouraged," The Bakersfield Californian noted in an

editorial on June 13, 1944. Such opinions did not stop civilians, especially Italian-Americans, from accepting the Italian prisoners. Many Italian-Americans searched for relatives among the Italian ranks, while others simply extended their hospitality to the young men. Ghilarducci had an uncle, aunt and first cousins living in Bakersfield, Calif., but he was not to meet them until after the war. Still, his Bakersfield relatives made contact with the Italians at

Camp Roberts, and eventually welcomed a group of them, including my father, into their home on a regular basis.

For the young Italian men, Saturdays and Sundays now meant a visit to an American household, with home-cooked dinners, dances and a renewed connection with family life, so important in Italian culture. The bonds that formed became so strong that some Italian prisoners, including my father, would marry their American sweethearts after the war.

Repatriated to Italy by 1946,

the Italian soldiers went home to a country that had been devastated by the war. In the years that followed, they and their compatriots were to struggle with poverty and unemployment, perhaps made harder for the former prisoners of war by the richness and productivity they had seen in the United States. Many former Italian prisoners of war would return to America, some as male war brides, to become loyal, hard-working U.S. citizens and to raise American-born families, most of whom know all too little about the extraordinary circumstances their fathers encountered during World War II.

FOUNTAIN OF GOOD WILL

Today, the section of Camp Roberts that once housed the Italian prisoners of war is a flat, empty field covered with scraggly, yellow weeds. It sits idle under the post's Range Control operations about three miles northwest of the camp entrance. Bordering the Nacimiento River, the site reflects nothing of its historic past. The prisoner-of-war barracks, hastily built in early 1943 in the old Civilian Conservation Corps compound, are gone. Only one relic of Italian prisoner-of-war history can be found there, if you know where to look.

A few feet off the dirt road that winds past the former compound rests a fountain, half-buried in the ground. It sits in disrepair; the cement globe that once sprayed water now lies toppled and broken in the fountain's trough. One clue hints at the fountain's origins: The date, 1945, is carved in a slab of concrete at the fountain's base. This is all that remains at Camp Roberts of the Italian prisoners of war, who built the fountain out of indigenous stones and man-made mortar during their stay in California's "Middle Kingdom" during World War II. It has been dry for almost 60 years.

More than half a century later, however, this neglected fountain is ready to flow again, only this time

with the story of its Italian makers. Historic preservationists at Camp Roberts are formulating plans to move the Italian-made fountain to the camp's museum in an effort to maintain and highlight the history of the Italian soldiers who lived and worked on the post during 1944-45.

Representing a nearly forgotten chapter in the history of Camp Roberts, this artifact is symbolic, perhaps, of the fountain of good will that was created by America's humane treatment of the oncebeleaguered Italian soldiers, who became the fortunate recipients of the largest and most generous prisoner-of-war program in the history of the United States.

America's treatment of the Italian prisoners of war – and the 375,000 German soldiers it also held captive in U.S. camps during the war – remains, for the most part, a shining testament to our nation, for no other country treated its prisoners of war as well as the United States did during World

By adhering carefully to the Geneva Convention, the United States hoped that American soldiers taken prisoner overseas would receive similar treatment. They did-

Furthermore, more than 600,000 Italian soldiers who were not captured by Allied forces later were taken prisoner by Germany; an estimated 70,000 would perish in German labor camps. Except for a relatively small number, who mostly died from natural causes, all of the Italian prisoners of war held in the United States were safely repatriated to Italy after the war.

The majority of Italian prisoners of war would remember their captivity in America as one of the great highlights of their lives. Not only did they make valuable contributions to the U.S. war effort during their confinement here, but many would later become American citizens themselves, won over to a nation whose abundance, generosity and democratic values they witnessed first-hand during their transformation from wartime enemy to enduring ally. That, surely, makes it a history worth remembering by Americans too.

Merlo is a writer in Bakersfield. Her father, Giovanni (John) Merlo, was an Italian prisoner of war in the United States from 1943-46. His internment

at Camp Roberts.



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*********** A SALUTE TO **********

History comes alive at Camp

Historic items collected since post's start in 1941

Roberts

ences, goes an old maxim. If that saying stands true of individuals, it applies in an even greater degree of Camp Roberts. The history that has taken place here over the many decades since 1941 is comprehended little by most. Yet, the experiences and training of the many of hundreds of thousands of troops and civilians who have called Camp Roberts home for various periods of time, accumulates into an enormous human experience. The Camp Roberts Historical Museum's primary mission is to preserve and share that long and very moving story. Hopefully by learning of this important legacy, today's citizens and future citizens-troops, veterans and civilian visitors alike—will more fully appreciate the enormous sacrifices that have been made to ensure their freedom.

The Museum's exhibit acquaint you with the early history of the area, then bring you through the construction of Camp Roberts in 1940 – 1941, into the wartime boom era, and through the decades into the present day. Recently, the Vietnam exhibit was completed (thanks to Designer's Choice Baskets and Silks, Lieutenant Colonel Larry Kimmel, and others)--followed by the completion of a new mannequin in the Korean War room replete in a cold weather uniform with parka, pack and equipment in a winter snow scene. Not long ago, another new exhibit was completed honoring all the soldiers who have mobilized through Camp Roberts for the Middle East, many of whom are still serving there today. It features a modern-day National Guardsman in desert uniform with all the equipment being worn today in Iraq, as well as an Arabian mannequin in full native dress (brought back by National Guard soldiers who recently served in Saudi Arabia).

The Camp Roberts Historical Museum Foundation was formed recently as a way to get the community involved. The Foundation offers both Annual and Life Memberships, and provides a way to help support the mueseum while







LIVING HISTORY

TOP: Camp Roberts Historic Museum has a stockpile of old photographs. Here a former guardsman holds a bobcat kitten. MIDDLE: A group of WWII-era tanks train at the post.

LEFT: This harrowing image shows soldiers amidst a WWI gas attack.

keeping abreast of its progress, events and activities through its regular newsletter. Annual Individual Membership is only \$15 per year and an annual Family Membership is \$25. The Annual Corporate Membership cost is \$200. Life Membership for an individual or family is \$100. The Group Life Membership for a civic or business club, fraternal or veter-

ans organization, is \$200, and an individual or group may become a Life Patron for \$500. The Corporate Life Membership is \$1,000. All members will receive a membership card and a subscrip tion to the Museum Newsletter. The names of Life Patrons and Corporate Life Members will be inscribed on a plaque displayed **CONTINUED ON PAGE 9**



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